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Resurrecting the Ethnic Woman in  
Ishmael Reed's Flight to Canada

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## **“The Saga of Third World Belle”:**

### **Resurrecting the Ethnic Woman in Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*\***

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In a recent review of Ishmael Reed’s *New and Collected Poems, 1964-2006*, Joel Brouwer describes Reed’s works as surrounded by a “din of vivid and contentious sound bites” that “threatens to eclipse his writing itself” (para 1). Brouwer’s conclusion that “Reed’s imaginative project is much more complex than his reputation as a misogynist and misanthrope suggests” (para 2) resonates with other reassessments of Reed’s poetry and fiction in the past ten years. In particular, Patrick McGee and Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure have argued forcefully that critics, overwhelmed by Reed’s liberal use of allusions and stereotypes and by his controversial public pronouncements—for example, “[White feminists] like the work that bashes black men, which justifies their racist attitudes toward black men” (qtd in Dick 241)—have neglected his multicultural aesthetic and misunderstood the satirical content of his work. Focusing in particular on Reed’s reputation for anti-feminism, McGee concludes,

Reed never merely propagandizes for misogyny but situates misogyny in complicated symptomatic structures that have a direct bearing on the historical formation of race as an identity that grew out of the history of slavery and the African diaspora. His fiction may not always be uplifting or aesthetically appealing in the conventional sense, but it is self-critical and never simply transparent. (53)<sup>1</sup>

My primary concern in this essay is the self-critical nature of Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976), a satirical novel that challenges as simplistic any descriptions of Reed as a woman-hater. Readers have long overlooked the fact that Reed’s parody of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

takes as a principal theme male authors' representations of women and in particular the relationship between the ethnic woman and the men who claim her physically and artistically.

Essential to Reed's analysis of the ethnic woman's place in male writing is his multicultural or "Neo-HooDoo" aesthetic, which he derives from the Vodoun of the African diaspora and its cultural syncretism. According to his "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto," Neo-HooDoo arose in nineteenth-century New Orleans at the confluence of African-Haitian vodoun and the music and dance of slave culture and has become a cultural movement through which the new artist-priests "are building our own American 'pantheon'" or "loa (Spirits)" from the resources of all people, not just African Americans (*Conjure* 23). While Neo-HooDoo serves as an authorial strategy for reclaiming images of the ethnic Other, the Neo-HooDoo artist like Reed does not simply react to the mainstream but, in the role of the trickster, creates a new cultural field at once appropriative and multivocal and constantly in flux.<sup>2</sup> Reed specifically uses the metaphors of possession by spirits and conjuring by the houngan, or vodoun priest, to describe this act. In his works, the racial and gender stereotypes can ride characters just as spirits can possess individuals, but at the same time, resourceful artists can harness stereotypes for their own purposes.<sup>3</sup> Glenda R. Carpio clarifies the Neo-HooDoo artists' variant use of the stereotype by distinguishing between the houngan, or "ritual leader," and the boco, "who practices conjuring for witchcraft and uses it to create 'zombies'" (564). Reed acts as both, argues Carpio, conjuring ancestral spirits and animating the rigid, rotten stereotypes of slavery, then helping the reader distinguish between the two (565). For example in *Flight to Canada*, as Carpio notes, Uncle Robin symbolizes the slave whose apparent submission to Master and Church (unlike that of Stowe's Uncle Tom) is an elaborate and profitable ruse while Mammy Barracuda represents a Frankenstein-ian

combination of Aunt Dinah in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Hattie McDaniel's Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, and a pornographic dominatrix.

While the character of Mammy Barracuda has received significant critical attention<sup>4</sup>, that of American Indian dancer Quaw Quaw Tralaralara has been either ignored as irrelevant to Reed's larger analysis of the legacy of slavery in the U.S. or, like Barracuda, held up as evidence that Reed "finds women's liberation disrespectful of the patriarchal dignity of African society" (White 125). Yet a re-examination of the character suggests that Quaw Quaw (to use Carpio's terminology) is less a stereotype reanimated by Reed-the-boco than an ancestral spirit conjured by Reed-the-houngan—and this has tremendous implications for our understanding of the novel's protagonist and authorial alter ego, Raven Quickskill. In this essay, I will make two inter-related arguments in order to tease out Reed's complex analysis in *Flight to Canada* of his own depiction of ethnic women. First, Reed pairs his expropriation of Uncle Tom with an expropriation of Pocahontas, rather than a simple animation of the latter stereotype; as Robin manipulates the slaveholder's expectations of African American docility and subservience, so Quaw Quaw exceeds what Rayna Green has labeled "the Pocahontas Perplex," or the binary portrayal of the American Indian woman as Princess or Squaw, Mother or Whore. This recuperation of the American Indian as well as the African American "race traitor" signals the syncretic nature of Reed's trickster, who represents a blending only of ethnicities but also of masculine and feminine forms (admittedly, to a limited extent). Second, through his analysis of both Edgar Allan Poe's and William Wells Brown's aesthetics, Reed scrutinizes his own portrayal of women, ultimately admitting that if "*A man's story is his gris-gris*" (8)—a sacred possession and source of personal power not to be pilfered—so is a woman's. Raven's poem, "The Saga of the Third World Belle," identifies a primary target of Reed's satire: the aesthetic

appropriation of the female form within patriarchy and the parallel theft of the ethnic voice within Western art.<sup>5</sup>

*Princess Quaw Quaw Tralaralara and the Pocahontas Story*

*Flight to Canada* follows the adventures of Raven Quickskill, who literally and figuratively writes his way out of slavery. He plans to pay for his passage to Canada with the money from a poem, “Flight to Canada,” only to discover that his writing offers him freedom and thus is his *true* Canada. As Raven travels from Virginia to Canada and back again, few icons of American history survive intact: the slave master, Arthur Swille, proves to be a dyslexic sadist who drinks slave mothers’ milk and makes love to the corpse of his dead sister; the Uncle Tom figure, as represented by the supposedly subservient Uncle Robin, secretly alters Swille’s will in his own favor and coolly observes his master’s fiery death orchestrated by another slave, Pompey; the former house slave, Stray Leechfield, earns money to purchase himself through pornographic photography, blackface performances, and an escort service with a unique sales pitch (“‘I’ll Be Your Slave for One Day. . . . Humiliate Me. Scorn Me’”); 40s, the black militant, aligns himself with the anti-immigrant Know-Nothings; and even Abraham Lincoln (a.k.a. “The Player”) is a “minstrel” who manipulates the issue of slavery to achieve historical prominence (80, 43, 45). The novel lampoons the national myth of Pocahontas as well: Raven uses the name as a derogatory slur for his sometime lover, the American Indian dancer Princess Quaw Quaw Tralaralara, indicating that her complicity with her global capitalist husband, Pirate Yankee Jack, proves deadly to her own family.

While literary critics and reviewers note Reed’s recuperation of Uncle Tom through Raven’s authorship of Uncle Robin’s tale, they regularly neglect the connection between the Pocahontas

figure and Quaw Quaw, as well as Raven's poem about her, "The Saga of Third World Belle" (which, like "Flight to Canada," appears separately in the text and has an integral role in the plot). The myth of Pocahontas originated with mercenary-adventurer Captain John Smith's account of the young woman intervening in what he believed to be his execution at the court of Powhatan and later delivering life-saving food to the beleaguered Jamestown colony. Pocahontas was subsequently kidnapped by the Anglo-colonists and baptized as Rebecca, after which she married settler John Rolfe and traveled to England in 1616 as a guest in King James's court, a celebrity symbolizing not just the exotic nobility of the New World but also Indian acquiescence to English power.<sup>6</sup> Quaw Quaw likewise appears to represent a commodified exoticism and a submissive, effeminate indigenoussness, and for this reason has been linked to the grotesque embodiments of female stereotypes in the novel—anorexic feminist Mrs. Swille, zombie sister-lover Vivian Swille, acquisitive prude Stowe, and sadist slave-mistress Mammy Barracuda—as well as to what they identify as Reed's andocentric worldview. Yet upon closer inspection, and in light of the story she attempts to tell about herself, Quaw Quaw appears to be no zombie-stereotype summoned as spectacle; rather, like Uncle Robin, she is a reclaimed minstrel figure and nascent trickster whose art suggests she too will soon arrive in her own "Canada." In his desire to "free" her from Yankee Jack, Raven overlooks not only her power as a performer but also the implications of his own desire to possess her. Raven's frustration with Quaw Quaw, like his initial misinterpretation of Uncle Robin's strategic servility, shows that he still has much to learn about the complex history of African American and American Indian performers who found audiences through the commodification of their cultural identity.<sup>7</sup>

Of course Raven is not unfamiliar with the ethnic artist's manipulation of popular expectations. Throughout the novel Raven clearly fills the role of a trickster-author whose

writing—which he calls “his bows and arrows” and “his HooDoo” (88, 89)—actually wins him the attention of those whose authority he seeks to undermine.<sup>8</sup> Invited to a White House reception for “the leading scribes of America,” Raven soon notices the waiters are slaves and that “All of the furniture in the room is worth more than he is” (83, 82). Raven’s poem “Flight to Canada,” which is responsible for this invitation and other events of the novel, circulates widely and readily changes form, serving as *belle lettres*, a letter home, a dead letter, even as scientific evidence and a bloodhound. Reed offers an implicit pun: the true “fugitive poet” of the South is not Allen Tate or John Crowe Ransom, but the African American who reclaims a repressed history through signifying. Raven is more than a Pan-African trickster, for as Joe Weixlmann and Reed himself point out, his name comes from the trickster of Tlingit mythology who is characterized by “coarse humor” and “creation and guile” (Weixlmann 205, 206). In addition, Reed explains in *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1978) that his original attraction to the American Indian trickster figure was inspired by Leslie Marmon Silko’s use of Southwest coyote stories (2). Recognizing his story as his “gris-gris,” Raven struggles not only to reclaim and contain it but also to accumulate the stories and voices swirling around him and to unite red and black, artistically and physically. Essentially avian, capable of flight and migration, the protagonist of *Flight to Canada* is a destroyer-creator who circulates and shape shifts and whose writing does the same, taking on a life of its own.

Quaw Quaw is also an artist, a “cultured performer of Ethnic Dance, finer than Pocahontas, sturdy as the Maid of the Mist,” a “Third World belle” “popular on the college circuit, performing Indian dances,” profiting from her own exoticism (93, 92). Despite their common pursuits and sexual intimacy, Raven castigates Quaw Quaw for her marriage to a white man, her matriculation in the Western educational system, and her ethnic performances, all of which

indicate for him the larger submission of her people. ““Daughter of the West,”” he calls her, accusingly; ““Pocahontas rushing to place her body between the white man and the arrow intended for him. You and your Anglican Injuns”” (98). Raven knows that the marriage is economically and politically expedient for Yankee Jack, and he argues that Jack has successfully placed Quaw Quaw “*under a white spell*,” in part through her enrollment at Columbia University where she comes to reject the ““ethnic”” for the so-called ““universal”” (147, 95). When Quaw Quaw’s insists on returning to Columbia, Raven warns her,

‘Look, Quaw Quaw, they want your Indian; that’s what they want, and you’re giving it to them. You’re the exotic of the new feudalism. . . . They’re going to get your Indian and my Slave on microfilm and in sociology books; then they’re going to put them in a space ship and send them to the moon. And then they’re going to put you on the nickel and put me on the stamp, and that’ll be the end of it.’ (96)

Frustrated that she continues to defend her education, he finally declares Columbia to be, ““One big fucking Camelot. With darkies and Injuns to set places, pour and serve at the Round Table. Playing on the lute and reciting verse, doing court dances”” (98). Raven believes that the drive for the consumable minority—whether originating in academia or in popular venues—will commodify them out of existence, and that Quaw Quaw, like Pocahontas before her, has willingly sold herself. Raven’s use of “Pocahontas” as an epithet akin to “Uncle Tom” (or, more accurately, “Uncle Tomahawk”) depends on a simplistic understanding of the Pocahontas story. In a novel that traces the legacy of nineteenth-century racism in the late twentieth century, Reed does not let this stand but begins to show the reader the complexity of Quaw Quaw’s experience in colonialism.

Throughout *Flight to Canada*, Reed parodies the racist discourse of the nineteenth-century U.S. as it undergirded slavery and subsequent institutions that perpetuated the subjugation of



African Americans. With reference in particular to nineteenth-century theatre and public spectacles—including Indian jokes in the play *Our American Cousin* and the forced “tour” of captured Sauk leader Black Hawk, whom Arthur Swille calls an “an ethnic celebrity” (24)—Reed likewise highlights the discourse of savagery in a period when American Indians faced removal, warfare, and land allotments, not to mention widespread declarations of their disappearance or irreversible degradation. Non-Indian playwrights, poets, historians, painters, sculptors, composers, and others regularly employed Pocahontas as a symbol of divinely justified imperialism and national (or sectional) unity in the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Because the Indian woman’s body exhibited for nineteenth-century Euro-Americans the extremities of relationships between colonized and colonizer, she served as a knotty and unstable symbol Rayna Green names “the Pocahontas perplex” (703). This entangled metaphor consisted of a binary portrayal of the Indian woman as Princess or Squaw, Mother or Whore, a figure whose sexual availability was correlated with her civilization. As the young virgin who saved Smith and the Christian wife who served Rolfe, Pocahontas represented the feminine American Indian who submitted body and soul to Christian patriarchy. However, this national myth, so focused on Pocahontas’s physical performance and on the bestowed title of Indian Princess, could easily be converted into a warning against the degraded position and degrading promiscuity of the Squaw who served as the Indian man’s drudge and the white man’s lover. Like the body of the tragic mulatto or quadroon, that of the Indian Princess registered a sentimental culture’s fascination with the dark female as sympathetic victim and sexual object, a union of virginity and promiscuity.<sup>10</sup> Raven’s critique of and longing for the Third World Belle follows the outline of the Pocahontas perplex.

Like all racist discourse, the Pocahontas perplex rests on shaky foundations. Since the publication of Philip Barbour’s *The Three Worlds of Captain John Smith* (1964), many scholars

have questioned the validity of John Smith's famous account, linking the structure of the tale to European balladry and suggesting that Pocahontas's intervention at the execution may have been part of a ritual signifying the beginning of an alliance between Powhatan's and Smith's people (Tilton 5; Allen 52-56). Such a reinterpretation of history undermines the myth of Pocahontas but more importantly any harsh judgment of the historical woman's role in the success of Jamestown at the expense of her own people, a fact Reed acknowledges. Responding to Raven's criticisms of her actions—"Pocahontas, that's what you are," he declares in anger; "Turn in your own father for a pirate . . ." (164)—Quaw Quaw protests, "*That's not the way the story goes*" (164, emphasis mine). As the narrative begins to make clear, she has not knowingly or willingly betrayed her family but adapted in the aftermath of geographic and cultural displacement. In the recent *Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat*, Paula Gunn Allen further complicates the Pocahontas Perplex, pointing out that the name of Pocahontas is only one of at least four by which the historical Powhatan woman was known (Pocahontas, Matoaka, Amonute, and Rebecca) and that it indicates her child persona rather than the adult she willingly became through a familiar Powhatan process of "remaking a person into another person" (18). Of course, the woman whom Smith famously celebrated as the savior of his life and that of Jamestown colony became immortal through the affixing of one name, Pocahontas, to one body, that placed between Smith and what he believed to be executioners' clubs. This erased her historical agency and the complexity of her political career (one reflected in the title of Allen's biography). Through Quaw Quaw, Reed indicates the complexity of the American Indian woman's position within colonialism, and through Raven, he shows how the American Indian woman continues to be reduced to a highly sexualized symbol of feminine ethnic submission.

The latter is most apparent in “The Saga of Third World Belle,” a “rare ‘serious’ love poem” (94) through which Raven attempts to educate Quaw Quaw about her husband’s ulterior motives. As Raven and Quaw Quaw travel across Lake Erie on the steamer *The North America*, Quaw Quaw discovers the manuscript for the poem, addressed to “My Indian Princess,” and she is devastated by what it reveals:

Your favorite pirate uses  
Your Dad’s great-chief’s skull  
As an ashtray  
And sold your Mom’s hand-knitted  
Robes to Buffalo Bill’s  
Wild West Show

He buried your brother alive  
In a sealed-off section of the  
Metropolitan Museum

..... (123, lines 5-13)

Quaw Quaw is the unknowing victim of cultural commodification and museum-ification as connected to the nineteenth-century ascendancy of the doomed Indian myth; a white audience enjoys the display and the performance of the Indian as tamed by Buffalo Bill, Yankee Jack, or the curator’s controlling narratives. “‘Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t anyone?’” the distraught Quaw Quaw asks, then she tentatively begins to narrate her own account of supposed “complicity” in Yankee Jack’s colonialism: “‘I’ve been with this man since I was fourteen. He raised me. Sent me to school. Paid my bills. I loved him. But if I had known . . .’ She breaks into sobs, burying her head in the wet pillow” (121). Seeing that the revelation devastates Quaw

Quaw, that she has been kept ignorant of her husband's actions, Raven regrets his composition: "He didn't want her to learn about it this way. No, not this way" (121). Like his "Flight to Canada," "The Saga of Third World Belle" escapes Raven's control and wreaks havoc, revealing to Quaw Quaw that Raven, as a poet who protects his own story through conjuring, believes her own has been wrested from her. To Raven, Yankee Jack is a literary pirate, like Stowe.

But this raises the issue of Raven's own piracy. How do we judge this poet who appropriates Quaw Quaw's story, refers to her as Third World Belle, and jealously complains that another man has sexual access to her? Even before reading "The Saga of Third World Belle," Quaw Quaw pleads with Raven to listen to her version of the story, to halt momentarily his lengthy warnings and accusations:

'Don't be mad, Quickskill. Don't leave so soon. I was just trying to communicate.'

'Communicate what?'

'You know how non-verbal I am.'

'I don't get you . . . .' (97)

Raven admits that he simply does not understand Quaw Quaw or the meaning of her performances and subsequently that he often forgets how "young" she is (105). Her growing attention to Raven's warning reminds us that, despite her occasional expression of cultural elitism and her fear of racial indeterminacy, this woman who was kidnapped and re-educated in her youth is undergoing an evolution facilitated not only by her relationship with Raven but also through her dance.

The very name Princess Quaw Quaw Tralaralara—with the juxtaposition of Princess and [S]Quaw—indicates that Raven's love object is more than the sum of her stereotypical parts, encompassing and exceeding the Pocahontas perplex in a trickster fashion and in a negation of the educational system that has played a role in shaping her. Put another way, she is an American

Indian woman whose name resists the stability of reference on which the Pocahontas myth relies. Possibly a transcription of a bird call, the name *Quaw Quaw Tralaralara* links the princess to Raven, Uncle Robin, and the other tricksters in the novel who take their names from birds and draw energy from migration out of Virginia and back again, into the Uncle Tom persona and out again. One critic argues that the trill, *Tralaralara*, indicates “flightiness,” just as *Quaw Quaw* makes one think of “a raven’s cry” and “squaw” (Nazareth 214). Yet the name also resembles the unpredictability and volatility of scat singing, which transforms the voice into a powerful instrument—a transformation *Quaw Quaw* certainly needs. Her ability to shape shift and her composite identity, in addition to her misguided quest for “universalism,” are all signs of a trickster in its transitional and transformative state, of a “Pocahontas” not contained by the national myth.

After abandoning the Canadian-bound yacht while Raven and Yankee Jack bicker, *Quaw Quaw* re-appears crossing from the American to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls on a tightrope eleven hundred feet long. Joining a crowd of spectators, Raven slowly realizes who he’s watching: “She was in Indian clothes. . . . She was walking on a tightrope across Niagara Falls! . . . She was doing what no man had ever done. She was coming across, backward. *Quaw Quaw*! He could tell it was she because he knew her backward quite well” (156-57). If “The Saga of Third World Belle” is Raven’s love poem for *Quaw Quaw*, her performance above the falls is her response, for she carries a banner that reads “*Quickskill, I love you*” (157). But the frontier dancer expresses more than love in this act. Raven realizes, “Her feat was like her life, between the American and Canadian Falls with a gorge underneath. They argued all the time, but this they had in common. He was the raven. *Ga! Ga! Gaaa! Ga!* They both were capable of producing cliff-hangers, as she was now” (157). *Quaw Quaw*’s performance is a physical

manifestation, an artistic expression, of her condition, made possible by and echoing Raven's poetic self-expression in "Flight to Canada" and "The Saga of Third World Belle." Raven's bird call, in syllable and meter, resonates with *Quaw! Quaw! Tralaralara!* and confirms that both of these tricksters perform while perilously suspended between regions, nations, cultures, and identities. In this way, they resemble Reed who describes the experience of the "colored poet" in the poem "Jacket Notes" (1973) as follows:

Being a colored poet

Is like going over

Niagara Falls in a

Barrel

.....

But what really hurts is

You're bigger than the

Barrel (*The Reed Reader* 362, lines 1-4, 20-22)

Quaw Quaw's backwards walk across Niagara represents more than a publicity stunt or demonstration of love. This performance connects her literally and symbolically to a number of American Indian women who, by the end of the nineteenth century, turned audience fascination with Pocahontas, and the Indian Princess more generally, to their advantage, utilizing costume and performance to claim a public voice. Through her backwards walk over the Niagara, Quaw Quaw channels most directly the experience of Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša, 1876-1938), who in three autobiographical essays published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1900 shared not only her traumatic experience as a student in an Indian boarding school but also her subsequent crisis of identity and calling.<sup>11</sup> In a famous passage from "The School Days of an Indian Girl," Bonnin describes the turmoil she felt as a young woman during those summers when she returned to her

mother's home on the Sioux reservation after attending White's Manual Labor Institute in Indiana:

During this time I seemed to hang in the heart of chaos, beyond the touch or voice of human aid. My brother, being almost ten years my senior, did not quite understand my feelings. My mother had never gone inside of a schoolhouse, and so she was not capable of comforting her daughter who could read and write. Even nature seemed to have no place for me. I was neither a wee girl nor a tall one; neither a wild Indian nor a tame one. This deplorable situation was the effect of my brief course in the East, and the unsatisfactory 'teenth' in a girl's years. (Zitkala-Ša 234)

Like Bonnin, and Pocahontas before her, the ambiguously "young" Quaw Quaw is taken from her parents as a small child and as a teenager finds herself alienated from family members and suspended over a biological and cultural chasm. None of these American Indian women definitively chose one culture over another but found themselves captivated by the liminality of their position as colonial subjects—and in need of a means to convey this experience. Like their twentieth and twenty-first century descendents who embraced "the authorial strategy of the trickster, purporting to tell one story and project one persona and actually implying another message . . ." (Dearborn 29), these representative women adopted and transformed the popular portrayal of the Indian woman.<sup>12</sup> Bonnin slowly moved toward cultural pride and self-authorship, she recounts, performing as a representative Indian woman for white audiences. When the teenage Bonnin successfully competed in an oratorical context, for example, she weathered the "barbarian rudeness" of an audience that taunted her with "a large white flag" depicting "a most forlorn Indian girl" under which was printed the word "squaw" (238). Her subsequent oratorical and musical performances "in full regalia" anticipated the white audience's image of the Indian Princess and replaced it with that of an accomplished advocate for American Indian civil rights (Maddox 152).<sup>13</sup> Literally suspended between worlds, as Raven notes, Quaw Quaw the trickster-

performer stages a spectacular allegory of her experience, reclaiming a story so often mistold in a format broadly appealing.

Raven's sexual pun—that he knows “her backward quite well”—also connects Quaw Quaw's tightrope crossing with Raven's artistic practice as described in “The Saga of Third World Belle.” Rather than declare physical possession of her, he emphasizes their parallel pursuits. “To you . . .” he writes Quaw Quaw,

. . . I am a native mind riding  
Bareback, backwards through  
a wood of words and when I stumble  
I get my Ibo\* up and hobble  
like a bloody-footed slave  
Traveling from Virginia to  
Ohio and if I stumble again  
I get my Cherokee up and smell  
My way to the clearing

.....

\* Ibos: a fiercely proud African tribe who'd rather cut their throats than be sold into slavery. [Reed's gloss] (123-24, lines 14, 16-24)

Embracing Quaw Quaw's judgment of his “savagery” and of the limits his pursuers place on his writing, Raven casts himself as a warrior-fugitive whose flight from oppression serves, trickster like, as an expression of cultural persistence. Though Raven complains to Quaw Quaw by letter that this process causes “people of my class” to “become like mythical Goofus birds . . . who fly backwards and build their nests upside down” (12), nonetheless he, like Reed in the larger work, uses chronologically and regionally backward movement to reclaim history. When Quaw Quaw



walks and somersaults backward across the Niagara, she similarly gets her Powhatan up. Like Raven's poetry, her performance will have unintended consequences, an agency all its own. Quaw Quaw escapes Raven's control and even the control of readers who would label her a product of Reed's misogyny. She is bigger than the Barrel.

### *A Tale of Two Belles*

Just prior to Quaw Quaw's discovery of "The Saga of Third World Belle," Raven meets his favorite author and source of inspiration, William Wells Brown, whose groundbreaking novel, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), confiscated the tragic mixed-race woman of antebellum melodrama and fiction for the purposes of historical correction. Bumping into one another aboard the steamer *The North America*, Brown asks Raven his line of work. Overwhelmed by meeting his hero, Raven hesitates as he responds: "'Why, I guess you might call me an anti-slavery writer, too, but I . . . well in comparison with your reputation, I . . . I'm just a beginner. I read your novel *Clotel* and . . . I just want to say, Mr. Brown, that you're the greatest satirist of these times'" (121). He then admits that "'["Flight to Canada"] kind of imitates your style, though I'm sure the critics are going to give me some kind of white master. A white man. They'll say that he gave me the inspiration and that I modeled it after him. But I had you in mind . . .'" (121). Brown is one of many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American authors Reed mentions in the novel, including Henry Bibb, Josiah Henson, Frederick Douglass, Elymas Payson Rogers, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, in opposition to the canonical white authors also mentioned: Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and of course, Stowe. In this scene Raven does serve as a mouthpiece for Reed, claiming Brown's foundational African American novel as the model for *Flight to Canada*; both, after all, incorporate a slave narrative,

figures of minstrelsy, and the tragic mulatto of the melodrama stage.<sup>14</sup> Brown proves a skillful satirist in *Clotel* as he complicates the popular tragedy of the chaste and sexually endangered mixed-blood slave woman by depicting his heroine and her sister as the offspring of Thomas Jefferson and a mulatto slave woman, Currer. This Third World Belle does not achieve literal freedom through a fateful leap like Stowe's Eliza, who crosses the Ohio River by jumping from ice floe to ice floe. Instead, *Clotel* jumps to her death in the Potomac to avoid her captors and subsequent transport to the notorious slave market of New Orleans. Brown's commentary on the death drips with sarcasm and irony in its condemnation of a slave-holding Republic: "Thus died Clotel, the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, a president of the United States; a man distinguished as the author of the Declaration of American Independence, and one of the first statesmen of that country" (Brown 185). As Reed seems to acknowledge, even the raucous *Flight to Canada*, with its portrayal of Lincoln the Player and Stowe the Thief, does not approach the iconoclasm of Brown's tragic portrait of the President's daughter. Following Brown, Reed claims authority over the life story of the president (Lincoln but also Jefferson Davis) and liberates the historical sources for the Uncle Tom and Pocahontas myths.

Throughout *Flight to Canada*, Reed directly contrasts the Third World Belle as created by Brown and Raven with the Southern Belle of Poe. According to Uncle Robin, Virginia is "the land of the hunted and haunted," "where the devil reigns" (173), and for this reason, the author of the grotesque and arabesque is "*the principal biographer of that strange war*," though he died in 1849 (10). In his parody of Poe's gothic characters, Reed acts as the boco, uncovering the putrid stereotypes of the Southern feudal ideal and their twentieth-century descendents. Mistress Swille, the representative Southern Belle, actually resists the fragile and chaste ideal of white womanhood, only to embrace the limited class and racial scope of second-wave feminism.

Refusing to feed herself because it is ““anti-suffragette,”” Mistress Swille requires Mammy Barracuda and her Topsy-like assistant, Bangalang, to take care of all her physical needs (20). Thus Mammy Barracuda rightly rejects Mistress Swille’s hollow salutation—““Oh, Barracuda, there you are, my dusky companion, my comrade in Sisterhood, my Ethiopian suffragette””—and subsequently disciplines this bedridden woman who ““won’t do nothing that a belle is raised to do”” through insults, physical violence (kicking, hair pulling), and a large dose of valium (111). Mammy Barracuda insists, ““you will return to watering flowers, selling cookies, fanning yourself, fluttering your eyebrows and blushing at flirtatious remarks of the Southern gen’mens”” (116).<sup>15</sup> The Southern Belle’s holy chasteness sends the Southern gen’men to other quarters for sexual fulfillment; Master Arthur Swille is drawn inevitably not only to Mammy Barracuda but also to the corpse of his dead sister, Vivian (Leigh), resembling the narrator of Poe’s “Annabel Lee” and the character of Roderick Usher (60). And like Madeleine Usher, Vivian Swille escapes her crypt, the site of their love making, to murder her unfaithful brother by pushing him into the fireplace. Once Reed hints that the murderous Vivian is really the house slave Pompey in disguise, we understand the parody: For Poe, whose Gothicism arises from the haunted Southern plantation, ““the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world . . .”” (Poe para 20), but in Reed’s hands this morbid, patriarchal aesthetic leads to victory over the master.

The boco of Southern womanhood and Poe’s macabre aesthetic, Reed simultaneously serves as houngan, conjuring not only Brown, Henson, and other African American men, but also resurrecting the spirit of Pocahontas and her offspring through Quaw Quaw. Raven, like Thomas McKenney and James Hall and so many other nineteenth-century historians and ethnographers, composes an American Indian biography without permission or input. For Raven, it seems, *the*

*oppression of a beautiful ethnic woman is the most poetic subject in the world.* In Raven's and Poe's obsession with the endangered woman, neither the Southern nor the Third World Belle writes herself into being. Titling the poem a *saga*, a gesture toward the Icelandic or Norse narratives of the middle ages, Reed suggests an affinity between Raven's poem and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), a "national epic" modeled on a Finnish epic and Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's collection of primarily Ojibwa oral traditions in *Algic Researches* (1839), traditions largely collected and translated by Schoolcraft's Anglo-Ojibwa first wife, Jane Johnston Schoolcraft. In other words, Raven reveals to Quaw Quaw her husband's act of cultural imperialism through the form by which Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and Longfellow appropriated American Indian materials for their own purposes. Reed winks knowingly as his supposed alter ego fails to grasp the hypocrisy of his authorial act. The true trickster strives to release, not control, the stories commodified within colonial exoticism.

Just as Raven's stated admiration for William Wells Brown makes clear an implicit goal of his poetry (social satire), Quaw Quaw's resemblance to the young Gertrude Bonnin underscores her emergent political consciousness and flight from Raven's controlling pen. Though Raven cannot immediately see this, his "love poem" for Quaw Quaw suggests he has begun to connect Quaw Quaw's strategic self-commodification with his own. Raven concludes "The Saga of Third World Belle,"

I'm on a fox hunt for you baby

Got my black cap and red coat on

I'm on a fox hunt for you baby

Got my black cap and red coat on

Just like a coyote cassetting amorous

Howls

In Sugar Blues

I airmail them to you

In packages of Hopi Dolls

*Ah ouoooooooo! Ah ouoooooooo!* (124, lines 31-40)

In the closing lines, Raven utilizes commodified (cassetted and packaged) African American song and American Indian religious icons to weaken Quaw Quaw's attachment to Western culture. If Quaw Quaw is "*under a white spell*," she is also under Raven's Coyote-inspired, syncretic, *black-capped* and *red-coated* charm. Raven's love for Quaw Quaw and desire to liberate her from Columbia University, Yankee Jack, and all they stand for reveal just as much about his own struggle as a trickster-poet negotiating the new feudalism. Full of frustrated longing and suggestive of the blues, his final howl expresses his longing to extricate himself from White House parties, literary journals, cassette tapes, and the other confining packages that paradoxically enable his poetry to circulate. Raven and Quaw Quaw are allied in their quest, so Raven need not steal Quaw Quaw's gris-gris, nor Reed Pocahontas's.

Despite this commonality and Raven's use of Quaw Quaw's story as a mirror for his own situation, Raven continues to judge her harshly, even after her trip over Niagara, calling the performance "'a cheap stunt'" and the dancer a race traitor (164). The fugitive poet whose work reclaims Uncle Robin as a figure of resistance ironically ridicules his lover for performing the ethnic dance that makes her own entry into Canada possible. But Reed himself has not given up on the Third World Belle or the misguided Raven. In the face of Raven's criticism, Quaw Quaw insists (as mentioned above), "'That's not the way the story goes'"—neither Pocahontas nor Quaw Quaw betrayed their fathers and both were forcibly educated by their kidnappers—and

abandons ship (164). The morning after her Niagara crossing, Quaw Quaw leaves Raven, this time with a note that reads, “‘Gone South’” (12). She too heads back to the cradle of the Pocahontas perplex and the myth of the subservient, happy slave to resurrect, rather than merely represent, lost voices.

Of course, this does not negate the fact that Yankee Jack has educated Quaw Quaw to disregard her American Indian heritage, and as long as academia both teaches her to discount American Indian culture and pays her to perform her Indian-ness, Quaw Quaw remains suspended between enslavement and freedom. Yet the novel makes clear that Raven’s composition of “The Saga of Third World Belle” cannot resolve the issue, for Quaw Quaw must tell her own story. She demonstrates the use of ethnic performance as a complicated means of expressing the experience and psychological aftermath of the “civilizing” process and reclaiming the figure of the American Indian woman. Even Raven seems to learn this, for he anticipates her arrival once he’s ensconced in Robin’s newly acquired plantation. “She’d be back,” he tells himself and us; “She always came back” (12-13). Raven’s words echo the final line of the novel—Pompey’s declaration, “‘Raven is back!’” (179)—and associates the artists, African American and American Indian, male and female, through their role as tricksters within the new feudalism. Reed’s Third World Belle is finally not a dead letter but a living woman, not an ideal but a *becoming*. Uncle Tom and Pocahontas need recuperation together, Reed suggests, and ethnic artists, male and female, need to recognize their common pursuit.

### *Conclusion*

Reed’s infamous commentary about strained relations between African American men, African American women, and white feminists exists alongside a complex account of how

authors, *including himself*, have attempted and failed to gain verbal and physical control over the so-called Third World Belle. Within *Flight to Canada*, the Indian Princess takes on a life of her own, not as a reanimated stereotype but as trickster who ultimately escapes Raven's control. Through criticism of Raven's relationship with Quaw Quaw, Reed himself rejects the Poe-like authorial role whereby one man constructs and controls the Belle who terrorizes others' dreams or the Stowe-like approach in which one woman appropriates a slave's story in order to make her white readers feel right. Instead, working with the metaphors of his Neo-HooDoo aesthetic, Reed suggests that the spirits of ancestors, once evoked, move beyond the control of the author to challenge the fixity of national myths, eventually freeing themselves, in form and name, from the inflexible types that have lost their explanatory relevance.

The trickster's work never ends just as culture never stabilizes, and for this reason, writes Reed in "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto," "Neo-HooDoo is a Dance and Music closing in on its words" (*Conjure* 25). Raven and past readers of *Flight to Canada* have neglected how Reed conjures in Quaw Quaw the ancestral spirits of Bonnin and other nineteenth-century American Indian women who transformed the myth of the Indian princess into a vehicle of protest. And reaching back even further, he invokes the Powhatan woman known as Pocahontas, Matoaka, Amonute, and Rebecca, an American Indian woman still dancing, singing, performing, and closing in on her own story. Paula Gunn Allen asserts that the Powhatan woman who visited the English court understood her interrelated political, cultural, mythical, and spiritual roles better than subsequent historians, that she anticipated the power and the perplexity of her legacy as a woman between worlds. Reed's *Flight to Canada* affirms this legacy of Pocahontas in the face of the stereotypes that obscure it, the same representations that threaten to overwhelm the voice of the ethnic woman. The figure and name of Pocahontas haunt us today not because they capture a "timeless

truth,” be it the “natural” submission of savagery to civilization or the “inevitable” ascendance of Christianity in the New World. Rather, the example of the Powhatan woman continues to evolve in accord with the past as well as the present because the woman known as Pocahontas cannot be controlled by those who call her up, though many continue to do so.<sup>16</sup> Reed’s description of Neo-HooDoo authorship as conjuring resonates with nineteenth-century attempts to resurrect the Pocahontas story for nationalistic purposes but also undermines such assertions of authority. Reed’s “The Saga of Third World Belle” contains self-criticism and awareness as the author reclaims Uncle Tom and admits Pocahontas is a loose spirit.

### Notes

The author would like to thank Diane Price Herndl, Linda Shenk, Scott Hanrath, and Lexie Ahrens for their invaluable help with this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Mvuyekure likewise asserts, “By failing to both investigate the multiplicity of allusions in Reed’s novels and to regard Neo-HooDooism as a poetics of multiculturalism, critics have either misread or misinterpreted Reed’s novels” (203).

<sup>2</sup> Through his insistence on cultural pluralism, Fox writes, “Reed helped to open a space for blackness to reinterpret itself, to finally see itself as one great heterogene in an even vaster heterogenous context” (6). Though Reed differentiates between the African and American Indian traditions, Henry Louis Gates’s description and analysis of the Pan-African trickster and Gerald Vizenor’s theorization of the trickster in postmodern American Indian fiction both apply to Reed. The Neo-HooDoo artist, like the Signifying Monkey, “dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language . . .” (Gates 52). In addition,



that artist “is a communal sign, comic discourse, and does not represent aesthetic modernism in narratives or the glorification of isolated individualism” (Vizenor 193). Though he draws on both, Reed asserts that the African trickster tradition is overtly didactic while the American Indian trickster tradition is not (Dick 241). For more on the relationship between signifying, the trickster, and Reed’s Neo-HooDooism, as well as the indeterminacy of trickster texts, see also Tietchen 334, Monsma 83-88, and Lindroth.

<sup>3</sup> For a description of Reed’s Neo-HooDoo aesthetic and the place of stereotypes within it, see Ludwig. “Like Bakhtin’s novelist,” he concludes, “Reed is a ‘biased’ mediator in a special type of ‘verbal give-and-take’ situation. His own role model seems to be the Legba-figure” (334). As the title of Reed’s 1978 poetry collection suggests, Legba serves as “a secretary to the spirits.”

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Harris, who writes, “By making her character such a despicable puppet to the ideology of the slaveholding South and the beliefs it passed into American culture, Reed finally suggests that some black women were so well trained during slavery in their white culture-supporting, denial-of-black-progress roles that their descendents in the twentieth century cannot possibly have denuded their psyches of such desires. Pathologically strong black women especially, Reed posits, are anathema to racial advancement, not because they are forced to be, but because they love whites and white society enough to willingly perform that function” (55).

<sup>5</sup> My focus on Reed’s portrayal of American Indians in a novel inspired most directly by slave narratives and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* stems from Reed’s interest in multiethnic, multicultural dialogue, as evidenced by his Before Columbus Foundation, an organization he founded the year he published *Flight to Canada*, his 1982 essay collection *God Made Alaska for the Indians*, and

his 2003 *From Totems to Hip-Hop: A Multicultural Anthology of Poetry across the Americas, 1900-2002*.

<sup>6</sup> In a 1616 letter to Queen Anne and in the subsequent *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* (1624), Captain John Smith established this popular account. On Pocahontas's life among the English, including her trip to London, see Kupperman 196-203. For historically informed analyses of the Pocahontas myth's role in United States culture, see especially Green, Dearborn, and Tilton.

<sup>7</sup> Reed writes, "Working on *Flight to Canada* introduced me to slave narratives and other materials that acquainted me with a history of the United States that I hadn't known and enabled me to see that much of the education I'd received was, as Malcolm X said, 'cotton-patch' history" (*The Reed Reader* xx). Through his relationship with Quaw Quaw, Raven, like Reed before him, learns the limitations of his education.

<sup>8</sup> In this way he bears a strong resemblance to Chief Showcase of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) who performs "militant poetry" for villainous white cowboy Drag Gibson and his crew of cowpokes. Such public militancy, de-clawed by literary fashion, serves as perfect cover for his secret campaign to undermine white hegemony through tobacco. "If I can't get their scalps I'll get their lungs," he tells hero Loop Garou, even if it means "end[ing] up in front of a barber shop with a tomahawk in one hand and box of cigars in the other . . ." (40, 41). On Chief Showcase as trickster, see Tietchen 333-36.

<sup>9</sup> Nowhere was this more apparent than in the many antebellum plays, melodramas and burlesques alike portraying the iconic Princess, including James Barker Nelson's *The Indian Princess; or, La Belle Sauvage* (1808), George Washington Parke Custis's *Pocahontas; or, The*

*Settlers of Virginia* (1830), Robert Dale Owens's *Pocahontas: A Historical Drama* (1837), and John Brougham's *Po-Ca-Hon-Tas, or The Gentle Savage* (1855). For an analysis of Barker's and Custis's Pocahontas plays and the early nineteenth-century staging of the Pocahontas story, see Scheckel 41-69.

<sup>10</sup> On the princess/squaw binary in depictions of American Indian women, and in particular the relationship between their sexual traits and position as colonial subjects, see also Bird 78-87. The portrayal of the "squaw drudge" not only silenced the American Indian woman but also served a crucial role in the discourse of imperialism, which in the words of Gayatri Spivak, allowed the nation to assert, "'White men are saving brown women from brown men'" (Spivak 296). On the "squaw drudge" see Smits.

<sup>11</sup> Bonnin was not alone in this endeavor. In the role of a Paiute spokesperson and following her successful service to the United States during the Bannock Wars in 1878, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins (1844?-1891), a daughter and granddaughter of chiefs, toured western and eastern cities advocating Indian rights, and in particular Paiute land claims, publishing the autobiographical *Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* in 1883. Anglo-Mohawk poet and author Emily Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake, 1861-1913) challenged pervasive stereotypes of American Indian women through her performance as "the Mohawk Princess" and such collections as *The White Wampum* (1895) and *Canadian Born* (1903). On Winnemucca Hopkins, Johnson, and Bonnin, see entries in Bataille.

<sup>12</sup> Dearborn links the silencing of Indian women to the condition of female ethnicity in the United States and identifies Pocahontas as a governing myth for the ethnic woman writer who

must struggle to represent herself, a “metaphor [for] both her sexual and her ethnic oppression” (100). On Bonnin’s explicit use of the trickster figure in *American Indian Stories*, see Smith.

<sup>13</sup> These performances included lecturing, poetic recitation, dramatic presentations, and violin playing (Bonnin attended the New England Conservatory of Music), and in 1913 she collaborated with William Hanson on *The Sun Dance Opera* (Maddox 141-53). While Bonnin spent the last decades of her life pursuing reform agendas through progressive organizations, including the Society of American Indians, she was, perhaps, most famous for her costumed presentations of the Indian woman through which she reclaimed her body and her voice.

<sup>14</sup> Brown composed works in multiple genres and was particularly adept at using spectacle and performance in his arguments against slavery. In 1850, for example, he toured Great Britain with a large canvas depicting twenty-four scenes of slavery described in an accompanying pamphlet, and his *Experience, or, how to Give a Northern Man and Backbone* (written in 1856) and *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858) are the earliest known dramas by an African American (Fabi viii-ix).

<sup>15</sup> Like Babo of Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855), Mammy Barracuda takes great pleasure in turning the role of maidservant and confidant into a brutal demonstration of force, threatening Mistress Swille with a razor and using “an old hard brush rich with pine soap” to bathe her (112, 113). Once restored to her proper appearance, Mistress Swille heads to a “garden poetry reading of Edgar Poe” (who has recently pawned her goldbug pin) and prepares for the next dinner party at which the men will recite “Ode to the Southern Belle” (115, 116).

<sup>16</sup> The ongoing fascination with Pocahontas can be seen in director Terrence Malick’s recent film *The New World* (2005) and in the multitude of historical and biographical treatments published

since 2003 by HarperCollins, Knopf, Hill and Wang, and Basic Books, all in time for the four-hundredth anniversary of the Jamestown settlement.

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